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ABSTRACT

Practicum courses in theatre arts, which function as laboratories where students can practice theatre and receive academic credit for their efforts, greatly benefit students. Because the main goal of such practicums is cooperative achievement of the best production possible and since every step of a production involves a new problem or decision, the practicum course appears to provide an ideal model for life training as well as for artistic training. An experiential model created by Kolb, Chickering, and others tries to capture both the cognitive and the socioemotional factors that go into knowledge acquisition and application. The practicum theatre activities support this model by focusing on having experiences or taking actions, observing and reflecting on these experiences in order to generalize from them, and re-using the generalizations to solve new or similar problems. The direct experience that theatre practicums provide, therefore, assures strong student motivation because it teaches socialization skills and creative problem solving by offering students the experience of producing art and of plying their craft before an audience. (EL)

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JAMES L. DE YOUNG

THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE
RELIC OF THE SIXTIES OR HOPE OF THE EIGHTIES

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Practicum courses in theatre arts are the equivalent of studio courses in Art or applied courses in Music yet in some quarters they still have not received the badge of legitimacy. Our college labels them workshops but whatever the name they function as laboratories where students can practice theatre and receive academic credit for their efforts.

At our institution there are three different practicums. The most popular is called Theatre Workshop and it is a one sixth credit per term class (about 1/2 semester hour) used by actors or technicians who are working on current college theatre productions. This course requires a minimum of 25 clock hours of work plus a satisfactory evaluation from a faculty supervisor. The time requirement is based upon an assmumption that a full credit course would involve an average of 50 class hours plus two hours out of class for every hour in. Thus 1/6 of 150 hours equals the twenty five hour minimum requirement. Grading in this practicum is on a credit/no credit basis. Our institution

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requires that each student take at least one course in artistic performance or practice and this requirement can be fulfilled by taking the Theatre Workshop six times over a period of years. There is a second one-third course credit workshop for advanced practical production projects and a third level at a full course credit within the framework of independent study projects in acting, directing or design. These latter two levels carry standard graded evaluation and may also require more traditional academic work.

However the basis of all practicums is doing. There are usually no formal lectures, class meetings, reading assignments, or examinations. This does not mean that traditional academic work cannot occur. One of the significant advantages of practicum experiences is that the actual contact with a real problem can motivate the student to do more and better work in the process of solving it than he or she might have done in a more tradtional classroom setting. For instance if a student on the property crew is assigned to construct a medieval battle ax for an upcoming production, an integrated set of contacts, problems and deadlines are involved. Interviews with the director and actor about nature of usuage for the ax will have to be combined with library research on the appropriate look and construction of the piece. The entire project must be

completed for the opening of the play.

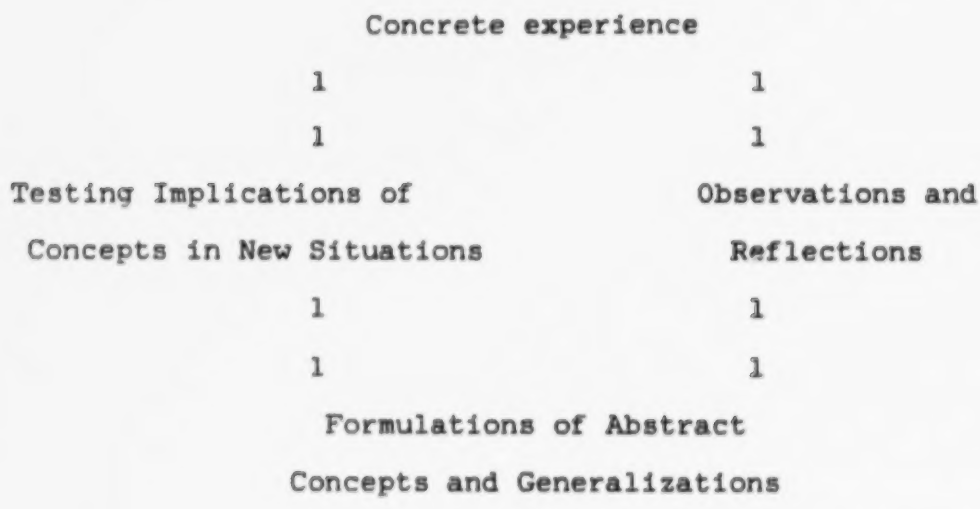
It is this welding of practical task with time that creates good motivation and it is good motivation that makes practicum education pedagogically superior. This conviction has been reaffirmed in each of the last two years at National Endowment for the Humanities workshops on our campus. During both sessions guest educators asserted that modern learning theory was becoming more interested in cooperation and group learning and less interested in competitive and solitary learning. The recent report on "Integrity in the College Curriculum" published by the Association of American Colleges calls for, among other things, a reduction in the amount of passivity in education and a drive to give students better tools for problem solving, decision making, and value discrimination.

Since the main goal in theatre practicums is cooperative achievement of the best production possible and since every step along the way in a production involves a new problem or new decision, it would appear that we have in place an ideal model for life training as well as artistic training. Strictly speaking all learning is experience and all practicum education is based on the premise that people

learn well by doing. In this sense arts practicums are in good company with other proven forms of experiential learning such as field observation, internships, or travel. These are currently growth areas at many eudcational institutions and with good reason.

Learning research in the last twenty years has concentrated on how we acquire knowledge and ultimately apply it. David Kolb, Arthur Chickering, and others have built an experiential learning model that tries to capture both the cognitive and socioemotional factors that go into knowledge acquisition and application. They draw from classic theory (both Dewey and Piaget) as well as modern research and their construct looks like this.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL (1)


Concrete experience
Observations and Reflections
Formulations of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations
Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations

Kolb's model portrays learning as a dialectic process. In stage one an individual carries out an action or has an experience. In stage two there is an observation of the results or effects of the experience along with some reflection on it. This leads to stage three where there is a realization that if the same action or experience would be repeated then similar results would occur. In other words observations are assimilated into a theory or generalization that is predictive of the future. The final stage tests the theory or applies it in a situation or set of circumstances

that appear to be within the range of the generalization. With the learning cycle complete the final synthesis is available for use as a guide for reacting to new experiences or actions.

In a typical theatre practicum the process would look like this. The student who needs to construct the medieval battle ax talks with the director and actor and goes to the library for appropriate pictures and historical data. Armed with this material he or she proceeds to make drawings or sketches, which are ultimately brought to the sceneshop. There the student must work with or instruct others in the timely construction of the property. The student is now fairly confident that if another type of battle ax was called for he or she could repeat the same process and get similar results. The final educational stage is actuated when the student realizes that the same procedures could be used to execute Victorian mouldings or Restoration snuff boxes.

Kolb and Chickering go on to articulate the different kinds of abilities that learners need to have at varying positions on the "Experiential Learning Model" and also to predict that people with certain aptitudes or preferences

will show stronger capabilities at certain positions on the cycle. For instance they have found that people who specialize in the arts are often very strong in Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation. They seem to excell in viewing experience from multiple perspectives and organizing complex relationships into meaningful "gestalts." They prefer dealing with human relations rather than things. They perform extremely well in situations that call for idea generation and brainstorming. Theatrical directors, actors, and designers would seem to be good examples of this kind of person. Using this information the theatre instructor ought to be able to design practicum experiences that would take special advantage of the experiential learning cycle and the particular strengths of arts students.

In the meantime it does appear that the typical theatre practicum is supremely supportive of the very latest model of modern learning theory. Doing theatre involves having experiences or taking actions, observing and reflecting on the experiences in order to generalize from them, and ultimately re-using the generalizations to solve new or similar problems. Every step along the way major importance is attached to analysis and the rigorous application of cognitive learning.

The "gestalt" or final theatre product may be forged by combining logical processes and research with more affective process or intuitive information, but ultimately in the theatre the creative totality is always tested on the anvil of the stage. The furnace of performance is quite real and the temperature of the reaction can be felt immediately. There clearly resides in the situation a strong motivation to exert maximum effort and produce high quality results.

Not only does a theatre practicum offer a respectable cognitive challenge, but in the affective domain theatre production remains an ever fruitful human relations laboratory. Whether it be in a rehearsal hall or the scene shop, we are teaching critical socialization skills as well as creative problem solving. As leaders of these practicums we need to consider our own role modeling behavior. For example do we berate or belittle our students while we are encouraging them to treat their fellow workers kindly and with respect. Do we "do it all ourself" while we exhort them to develop good teamwork. And finally do we lecture about free imagination and creativity in the classroom and then turnaround and demand blind obedience at rehearsal or in the shop?

Ideally our practicums should be developing positive self images, and good practical interpersonal relation skills for students. They should be arranged to move students toward successes. They should demonstrate some values in regard to fair play, working together as a team, sexual and racial equality and even some real attitudes about the nature of artistic truth seeking.

Finally of course there is the work of art itself that impacts on the practicum student. While doing theatre one is exposed to the thoughts and ideas of the ages. You can see and debate the relative values of human actions and vicariously touch momentous victories, stinging defeats, thwarted desires, and fulfilling loves. This is why there is no time for anything but the very best and most provocative plays in a school theatre's production schedule. If there is an educational function for us, it can be magnified if the form and content of our seasons are the best and most challenging we can find.

The bottom line is that practicum education is strong education. It offers direct experience and assures strong motivation. Modern pedagogy leans heavily on participatory learning, simulations, case studies, role playing, etc. and

our participation courses have been doing just that. Theatrically oriented experiences are both absorbing and fun. Play acting like child's play is a ritualized form of exploration of the world that is both enjoyable and challenging while being structured to move towards a satisfying learning conclusion. Seeing is better than hearing and doing is better than seeing.

Or as an old Chinese proverb has it.

I hear; I forget
I see; I remember
I do; I understand

ENDNOTE

(1) taken from D. A. Kolb and R. Fry "Toward an Applied Theory of Experiential Learning," in Cary Cooper, ed. Theories of Group Processes, (London/New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975).

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